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DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A FRENCH-FOR-SPECIFIC-PURPOSES (FSP) PROGRAM: LESSONS LEARNED FROM ESP

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores important theoretical issues and previous research relevant to the teaching of languages for specific purposes, and, based on this body of literature, outlines a course of action for setting up, implementing and evaluating a program where French instruction is geared towards specific disciplines or occupations, such as business, engineering, agriculture, architecture, or international law.

Those interested in designing courses in French for disciplines such as these will soon discover that much of the literature on teaching languages for specific purposes (LSP) has been inspired by research in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The goal of ESP courses is to prepare students whose native language is not English to either complete English-language course work in specific subject areas, such as medicine or law, or perform professional, on-the-job duties using English as the medium. ESP courses may be taught in (1) English-speaking contexts (such as the United Kingdom, anglophone Canada, the United States, Australia or New Zealand), (2) countries where English is considered a foreign language (such as France or Germany), or (3) countries where English is an official or second language, used, for instance, as a medium of instruction in schools, as is the case in India, and anglophone Africa.

DEFINING LANGUAGE FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

The term “Languages for Specific Purposes” is actually an umbrella term that applies to several different categories of courses which differ according to the learner’s needs. Johns (1991) provides the following model for instruction in English, one that is widely used in the US:

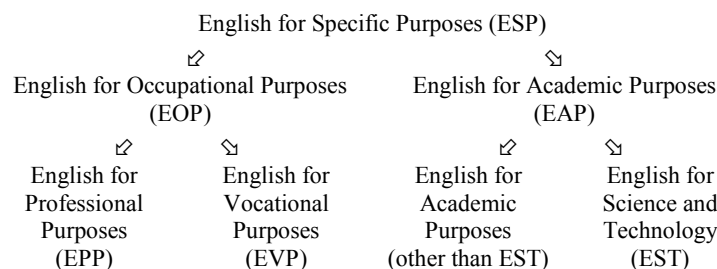


FIGURE 1

Subcategories of English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

English for Specific Purposes (ESP), therefore, encompasses two types of instruction: English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Courses in English for Occupational Purposes train individuals to perform on the job, using English to communicate. This type of course would be useful for airline pilots, for instance, or hotel staff who need English to perform their professional duties. English for Academic Purposes, on the other hand, features primarily a common core element known as “study skills” such as academic writing, listening to lectures, note-taking, making oral presentations, which enable one to succeed in English-language academic settings. A course in EAP would be useful to non-Anglophones planning to enroll in a university in the United States, for instance. English for Occupational Purposes, in turn, branches off into English for Professional and Vocational Purposes. English for Academic Purposes, on the other hand, contains a separate sub-category entitled English for Science and Technology (EST), which happens to be the oldest branch of ESP.

This model, which can be applied to other languages, clearly underscores the need for courses which are tailored to specific needs. Language for Academic Purposes, for instance, may be either “common core,” stressing study skills that are applicable across a wide range of disciplines, or “subject-specific,” in other words, addressing a particular academic subject, such as business or engineering. Subject-specific courses typically cover language structure, vocabulary, the particular skills needed for the subject, as well as the appropriate

academic conventions, all of which are relevant to languages other than English, including French.

THE CONCEPTS OF VARIETY, REGISTER AND SPECIAL LANGUAGES

In terms of the theory that has shaped the field of LSP, and ESP in particular, there are a number of concepts used such as language variety, register, and special languages. Different varieties are distinguishable in terms of the user characteristics (his or her region or social class) and their use (whether it be on the job, for a particular social function, or another particular situation). When describing varieties in terms of use, one often refers to register, the essential components of which are the field (or topic), mode (written or spoken), and tenor (which refers to the style on a scale of formal to informal, depending in part on the participants, statuses and role relationships involved). Special language, on the other hand, is a term that has been applied to the jargon used in professions such as computer science, advertising, banking, medicine, and law.

RESEARCH IN LSP

LSP theory has been based in part on linguistic analyses of various sorts, and a number of different approaches have been used to describe language. Robinson (1991) claims that the earliest research in LSP, presumably from the 1960s and 1970s, mostly examined sentence-level structure. Studies that followed focused on cohesion. Later, the meanings of forms in certain contexts became the primary concern of researchers. There have also been frequency studies which measure the occurrence of certain words or structures in scientific writing, for example.

The rhetorical approach to linguistic analysis for LSP focuses on larger chunks of language — paragraphs, for instance — and attempts to ascertain the reason for which a user chooses one linguistic form over another. One area of research that falls into this category is that which pertains to the use of certain verb tenses when discussing science and technology in academic journals.⁷ Others, such as Bhatia (1993), approach LSP from a genre analysis perspective, focussing on what one might refer to as “text types,” such as promotional material and research papers, the communicative purposes of those who produce them, and the

⁷For a comparison between French and English of non-verbal devices in scientific texts, see Lowe (1996). Beeching (1997) will also be of interest to FSP instructors.

rhetorical moves that operate within the text. In addition, some work has been done on spoken interactions in particular settings, such as business situations. All of these different approaches to linguistic analysis have, in one way or another, influenced LSP course planning and design.⁸

THE IMPORTANCE OF NEEDS ANALYSES

So how does one go about designing and setting up a French-for-Specific-Purposes program? As has been suggested by many doing research in this area, one would be wise to follow the steps that appear in Figure 2, keeping in mind that the process is a cyclical one where periodic feedback from all parties involved (coordinators, teachers, students, administrators, etc.) will continually influence course design, materials, and evaluation techniques.

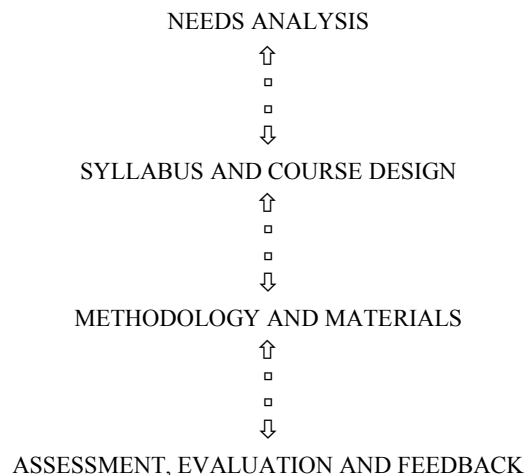


FIGURE 2

Recommended steps for setting up and implementing an LSP program
(adapted from Jordan 1997: 57)

At the very top of the model, one notices that Needs Analysis is a crucial starting point for designing a program of this type. And, as indicated in the stick drawing in Figure 3 (borrowed from Jordan 1997:40), a needs analysis can be a complex operation indeed, which may involve the

⁸ There have also been studies on specialist terminology, although Robinson (1991) tells us that most of this research is directed towards translators, rather than teachers of LSP.

collection of data about students (concerning their language proficiency, expectations, and other factors), the subject being studied, the receiving departments and the institutions which sponsors these students abroad, the language teachers' qualifications and attitudes, facilities, available materials, and so forth.

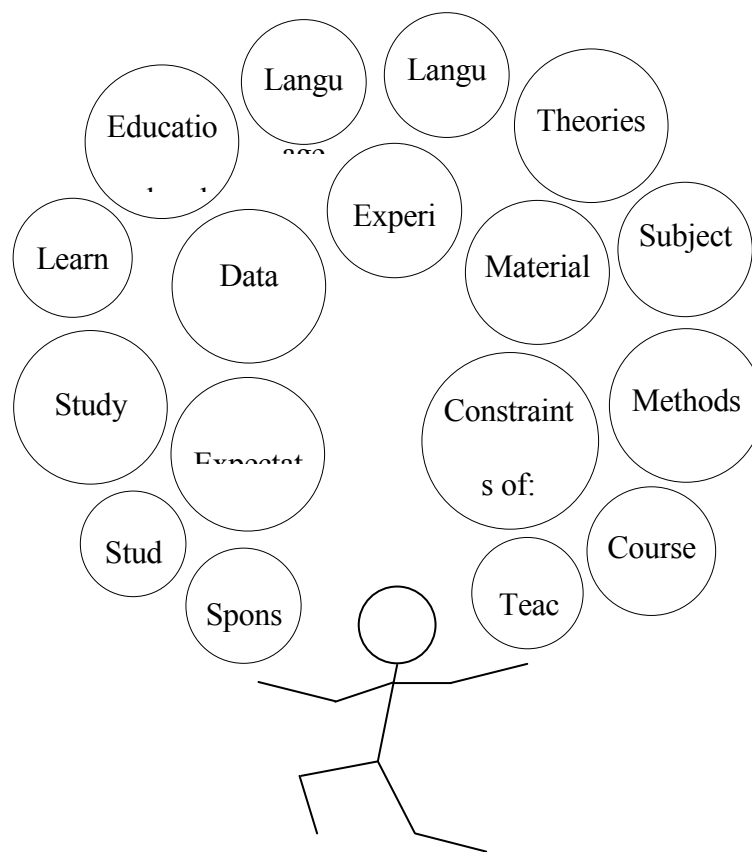


FIGURE 3:
The needs analysis juggler
(Jordan 1997:40)

Needs analyses vary in their scope and focus. Table 1 lists several different types of needs analyses encountered in the literature.

1. Target-Situation Analysis
2. Present-Situation Analysis
3. Strategy Analysis
4. Means Analysis
5. Learning-Centered Approaches
6. Language Audits

TABLE 1

In the category known in LSP as Target-Situation Analysis, one finds Munby's (1978) model, which ascertains with as much precision as possible the communication needs students will have in the future at the end of a language course. As its name suggests, this type of analysis involves gathering information about the situations in which the language will be used. Based on the needs profile generated by this model, an appropriate communicative syllabus can then be drawn up. In contrast, Richterich and Chancerel (1977 and 1980) propose a Present-Situation Analysis which focuses on students' language proficiency at the beginning of a language course along with data concerning the overseas sponsors, the teaching establishment in which the language course is being offered, and so forth. Often, those who design LSP courses want to conduct both types of analyses to get an idea of not only their starting point, but the precise direction in which they need to be heading as well. Other types of need analyses include Strategy Analysis which involves the study of possible teaching methods, different learning styles, and learning strategies when implementing a LSP program, and Means Analysis which basically enables LSP course designers to adapt their language courses to the local context in terms of the available teaching staff, the number and caliber of students, equipment, and materials. Using this approach, the LSP course is designed around the means at one's disposal, and not the other way around. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) suggest using a Learning-Centered Approach, where students' perceptions and attitudes are an essential component. They describe learner needs, or "target needs," as they refer to them, in terms of necessities, lacks and wants. Necessities represent the knowledge that the

learner has to obtain in order to perform well in the target situation. The term “lacks” refers to the gap between the knowledge that the student will need and the knowledge that he or she now has. “Wants” represents that which the learner has a desire to learn, a perception that may or may not conflict with the way in which the course has been designed. Students may want to develop their speaking skills in the language even though they may only be required by their department to be proficient in reading and writing the language.

Language Audits, finally, are typically those commissioned by companies to determine whether or not their employees require language training to perform on the job. Language consultants hired to carry out these audits describe the precise level of language performance required for specific job-related tasks within the company, measure the existing language proficiency of personnel presently performing these tasks, and then give their recommendations regarding how much language training is needed.

RECOMMENDED METHODOLOGY AND FOCUS FOR DATA COLLECTION

Needs analysis do, inevitably, involve data collection. Methods of collecting data for these various types of analyses are numerous indeed, and some are indicated in Figure 4 (Jordan 1997: 39).

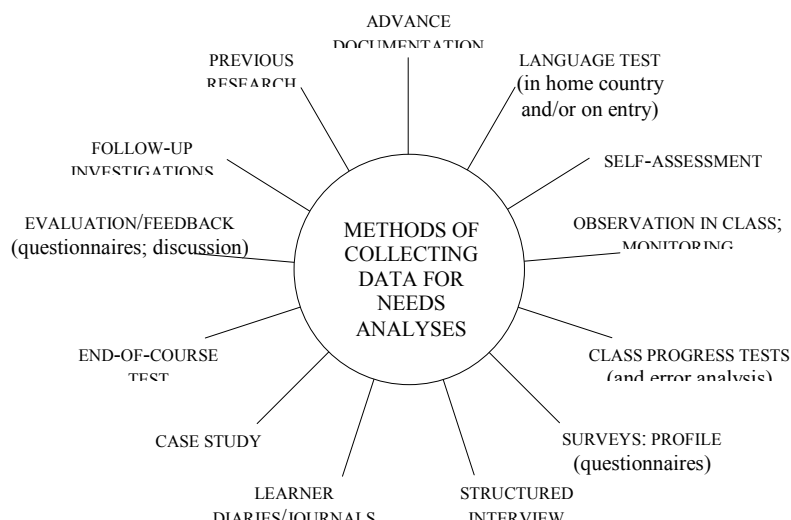


FIGURE 4

Methods of collecting data for needs analyses (Jordan 1997: 39)

Collection methods for needs analysis include self-assessment questionnaires or checklists, placement tests, class progress tests, class observations, interviews, surveys, and learner diaries. Course designers can also request advance documentation on students to get an idea of their educational background, including courses they may have taken previously in the target language. End-of-course evaluations and follow-up investigations with the students and their subject-specialist department are other sources of data, as are findings published by researchers in the field.

Some research has shown that students have a lot of difficulty with register-switching and the use of colloquial language in lectures, and that listening situations, in general, are challenging because of various types of cohesive elements (such as inter-sentence connectives), speed of delivery and other factors. Participation in seminars and academic discussions have also been referred to as a major cause of concern for students. A very interesting study conducted by Jordan in 1991 (reported in Jordan 1997:46–47) revealed a discrepancy between students' self-evaluation of their writing difficulties and their teacher's evaluation. The informants for the study were overseas postgraduates enrolled in university-level writing courses in the United Kingdom. The percentage of students who reported difficulties with various aspects of their writing and the percentage of teachers reporting on these very same elements encountered in the homework assignments they grade appear in Table 2 (Jordan 1997: 46–47).

1. Students		2. Teachers	
Vocabulary	62%	Style	92%
Style	53%	Grammar	77%
Spelling	41%	Vocabulary	70%
Grammar	38%	Handwriting	31%
Punctuation	18%	Punctuation	23%
Handwriting	12%	Spelling	23%

TABLE 2

The most striking differences occur in their perceptions of grammatical accuracy, appropriate style and, of course, the students' handwriting. Not

surprisingly, spelling also seems to be more of a concern to students than it is to their instructors.

Previous research can also inform us about optimal timing of courses. A 1987 survey conducted at Stanford University by Casanave and Hubbard (1992) found that international students, in the beginning of their doctoral program, were more concerned with course content than the quality of their English, and that academic writing courses would therefore be more beneficial if taken closer to the time they would be writing their thesis. Also, by that time they would be “more familiar with the writing style of the major journals of their field” (Jordan 1997: 49). This research might suggest that French-for-specific-purposes courses should be timed so that students will put their newly acquired language skills into practice immediately thereafter.

FSP SYLLABUS OPTIONS

Once a needs analysis has been completed and one is aware of the types of language situations students are likely to encounter in the target context, whether it be an undergraduate study abroad program in France, an internship with a company in Quebec, or advanced-level research in West Africa, an appropriate FSP syllabus can be drawn up. When designing this type of syllabus, one must take into account a number of factors including the (1) needs of students, (2) objectives for the course, and (3) resources available in terms of staff, materials, equipment, and finances. An FSP syllabus should involve pragmatic, experience-based instruction and be aimed at preparing learners for real-world demands. A major component of FSP courses, therefore, is experiential language learning in context.

There are, of course, a number of different types of syllabi one can use, depending on one’s philosophy of teaching, learner needs, available materials, the time element, and so forth. As the diagram in Figure 5 indicates, these various types of syllabi can be subsumed under three broad headings: (1) content or product-based syllabi; (2) skills-based syllabi; and (3) method or process-based syllabi.

In the category of content or product-based syllabi, one finds syllabi organized according to topic. In a French-for-Business course, for example, the syllabus might be laid out according to topic areas such as banking, telecommunications, accounting, advertising, and import-export. One can also organize one’s syllabus according to the types of

communicative situations in which students are likely to find themselves in the target context, such as looking for housing, shopping in outdoor markets,

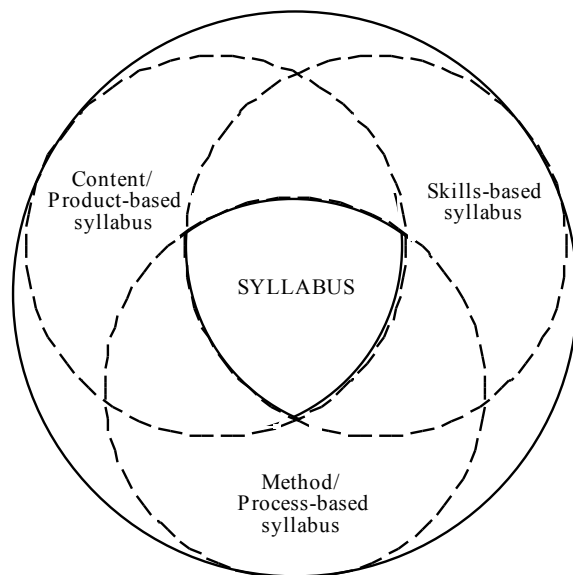


FIGURE 5
Types of syllabi commonly used in LSP course design
(Jordan 1997: 64)

dealing with the post office, explaining one's symptoms to a medical doctor, and so forth. Notional-functional syllabi, which emphasize specific linguistic means for carrying out various communicative functions, or speech acts (otherwise known as "the communicative approach"), and content-based syllabi where the main subject matter of the course (architecture, engineering, or whatever) dictates the selection and sequencing of language items to be taught, also fall into the category of content or product-based syllabi. Simply put, content-based instruction features content which is learned through a second language.

In skills-based syllabi, one sees an emphasis on one or more of the four traditional language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. One of these macro-skills — reading, for example — may be broken down into smaller micro-skills such as skimming, scanning, or reading for certain types of information.

Method or process-based syllabi, on the other hand, tend to involve tasks that are to be performed by students, such as planning itineraries, solving problems of various sorts in the work place, or completing a project. The focus in these types of syllabi tends to be on the learner, learning processes, and on meaning. One can also organize an entire syllabus around a group project, or a project on selective reading in one's subject field.

As indicated in Figure 5, in practice, many LSP courses combine several of these approaches to learning, adapting the syllabus to the situation at hand, including the types of instructors who teach the courses, the number, language level and attitudes of students, the number of contact hours one has with the students, and the types of materials one is able to obtain. Above all, the LSP course designer must be flexible. Managing time, identifying priorities, and drawing up action plans are essential, as is the ability and willingness to reshape the program once feedback has been obtained.

APPROPRIATE ACTIVITIES FOR AN FSP CLASSROOM

In terms of the specific teaching methods one might use in an FSP course, there is much to be learned from researchers who have concentrated on communicative methodology. Morrow (1981), for example, proposes the following 5 principles (Table 3):

1. Know what you're doing.
2. The whole is more than the sum of the parts.
3. The processes are as important as the forms.
4. To learn it, do it.
5. Mistakes are not always a mistake.

TABLE 3

The first principle basically states that students should feel at the end of a lesson that they actually know how to do something, in terms of communication, that they did not know before. The second principle claims that real communication extends beyond the sentence-level. In other words, what learners need is realistic language for real-life situations, not fragmented discourse. The third principle pertains to imitating normal processes of communication as much as possible. Real

communication typically involves situations such as an information gap where one person has information that another one does not and especially, “choice,” meaning that participants in a truly communicative exchange have a choice both in terms of what they are going to say, and the linguistic structures and vocabulary they use to say it. The fourth principle posits that learners must be actively participating before they can acquire anything, and the fifth refers to the idea that some errors (those that impede intelligibility, for example) are more serious than others. A certain level in inaccuracy is to be expected when real communication is taking place.

Johnson (1982) is helpful as well, in that he provides examples of problem-solving and task-based activities for the communicative classroom. The techniques involved, for instance, include (1) information transfer (from a text to a chart), (2) jigsaw, where each participant in the group or class has a different piece of information needed to complete the group task, (3) task dependency, where a second task cannot be completed unless the first task is successful (listening to a taped interview and then later writing a summary), and finally, (4) correction for content, whereby a student’s output, or language production, is primarily evaluated in terms of how well he or she got the point across during a specific task-based activity. For example, a student may be asked to describe an illustration of some sort, and their partner will try to draw the illustration based on what he or she is hearing from the person holding it.

Basically, for successful language learning to occur, the LSP syllabus must accomplish the following:

1. It should take into account the eventual uses the learner will make of the target language.
2. It must feature informational content which is perceived as relevant by the learner.
3. It should build on the previous experience of the learner, taking into account the learner’s existing knowledge of the subject matter, the academic environment, and the second language.
4. It must focus on contextualized use rather than on fragmented examples of correct sentence-level usage.

DEALING WITH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Another thing to consider when designing FSP courses, especially for students who are heading to Francophone contexts abroad once they complete their FSP courses in their home institutions, are the differences in expectations between the American system and professors, and their counterparts in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Quebec, West Africa, and other Francophone regions around the world. Not only are there culturally different norms of interaction in the classroom, but also writing assignments and exams are likely to be structured and graded in a different manner. Norms of interaction also differ across disciplines. Jordan (1997: 98) put it this way:

Academic culture consists of a shared experience and outlook with regard to the educational system, the subject or discipline, and the conventions associated with it. These conventions may, for example, take the form of the respective roles of student and lecturer/tutor/supervisor, etc. and their customary behaviour; or the conventions attached to academic writing, with its structuring and referencing system.

A number of studies have looked at cultural differences in the academic context. Furneaux et al. (1988) conducted a study in the United Kingdom where international students and British professors were both asked to rank the personal qualities they thought a research student should have. The results showed that students placed much less importance on being honest, critical and curious than did their professors. In terms of cultural difficulties outside the classroom, a 1988 study by Underhill, who distributed a “culture shock” survey to 350 international students in the United Kingdom, reports the most serious problems facing students living in Britain as those shown in Table 4.

1. Food and eating habits
2. English language not good enough on arrival
3. Difficulty making friends
4. British attitude to foreigners
5. Official procedures
6. Polite language
7. Travel by public transport
8. Pub and café culture

9. Daily schedule
10. Life in the host family
11. Teaching methods

TABLE 4

Problems ranked as being the most serious by foreign students studying in private language schools in Britain (Underhill 1991)

How does this information help us as FSP teachers? One lesson to be learned is that if one exposes students to the print media, television and radio, as well as guest speakers and holds group discussions with students about politeness strategies, taboo subjects, body language, culture shock, and so forth, it is more than likely that the students' cultural awareness will be enhanced.

The types of cultural blunders one is likely to make when dealing with native speakers in their native context is another area that should be explored in FSP courses designed for students heading abroad. Books such as Polly Platt's *French or Foe* and Raymonde Carroll's *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience*, as well as Molly Wieland's (1995) article on complimenting behavior, make excellent reading in this case.

PROMOTING INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING

There has also been some mention in the literature of different ways to encourage individualized learning, which has the obvious advantage of allowing students to progress at their own rate, using materials with which they feel most comfortable, and concentrating on language structures and/or topics that interest them most. One way of implementing this is to provide self-correcting activities outside the classroom. Those wishing to improve their listening comprehension could complete photocopied or on-line activities in the language or computer lab based on televised newscasts (provided on the SCOLA network or TV 5 programs), on CD-ROMs, and recordings of radio programs on a variety of topics. Students could complete true-false or multiple-choice questionnaires on programs listened to in the lab, and transcribe short pieces of discourse, such as French television commercials on videotape. Reading comprehension could also be enhanced by having students choose from a list of structured activities that require research via the Internet. They can also create a *dossier de*

presse on a topic related to their field. To improve their writing skills, they can correspond by e-mail with individuals in Francophone countries, write journals, or produce research papers on some area of their discipline. For speaking practice, they may be paired with native speakers once a week, if the logistics can be worked out.

And, to encourage students to explore French beyond the normally scheduled course, a web-site for the FSP program can be constructed by the program director and other interested parties. Table 5 lists some ideas for links that could be included in a web site of this nature.

1. Internet-based activities for language practice
2. Francophone e-mail correspondants listed by field
3. Syllabi for all FSP courses currently offered at an institution
4. "Les bonnes adresses" for your campus and surrounding community
5. Favorite French Internet Links
6. SCOLA schedule
7. TV 5 schedule
8. List of French-language computer software available at your institution
9. Links to websites for ordering materials for self-instruction
10. Relevant books available in the library and area bookstores
11. Calendar of Francophone culture-related events in the area

TABLE 5

EVALUATING AN FSP PROGRAM

The final step in one's plan of action is to evaluate both the students' progress and the course, in terms of (1) teachers, (2) methods and materials used, (3) content, (4) level of interest and variety, and (5) degree to which the objectives of students, the receiving departments and sponsors are being met. The results of this feedback will then lead to better decision-making as regards future syllabi, materials, teacher training, and scheduling. Evaluations may be conducted before the course, they can be formative (carried out at various stages during the course), or they can be summative (completed after the course is finished). They may be directed towards the students themselves, the FSP teachers, the subject-specialist department (Department of Business Administration, Department of Engineering), Francophone people abroad with whom the students will be studying or working, and anyone else whose input would be considered worthwhile. Methods of evaluations

include quantitative methods, such as tests of various sorts, and qualitative methods, which include interviews, questionnaires, and observations.

Inevitably, the question comes up as to whether or not the FSP program is actually delivering the results it promises to deliver. Therefore, some kind of quality control is necessary to ensure that the needs of students, sponsors and departments are being met. One accreditation measure, which can be applied to French, is being used for English for Academic Purposes courses in British universities (O'Brien 1996). The assessment criteria, all of which are essential components in a successful FSP program, appear in Table 6 (O'Brien 1996). Each of these criteria is evaluated by an independent council.⁹

1. Management and administration
2. Staffing
3. Resources and facilities
4. Course design
5. Teaching
6. Assessment
7. Student welfare
8. Course evaluation

TABLE 6

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN LSP

In terms of future research in LSP, and FSP in particular, one could examine existing programs in FSP across the country to see the level of French required to enter these programs, the types of students enrolled, the variety of course offerings, and syllabus content and methodology. Studies could be done on various aspects of FSP instruction, such as the effectiveness of team-teaching and the amount of language versus subject content instruction that should be involved. Individualized learning could be explored in terms of how to best utilize self-access facilities such as computer labs, as well as the effect of different learner strategies on learners' success. One could attempt to document the types of specific training for FSP instructors in order to perform well in the classroom.

⁹There are also a number of self-evaluation instruments described in the literature, such as those proposed by Mackay, Wellesley and Bazergan (1995) and Blue and Grundy (1996).

Case studies involving students who have completed FSP programs and are now using French in a professional capacity is another possibility.

CONCLUSION

FSP course design and implementation requires very special attention and flexibility because of various factors. FSP is goal-directed. One is likely to have students enrolled in FSP courses who like to use French for work purposes or to study their discipline abroad, not because they are particularly interested in the language, per se, although some may be. They are most often adults, and probably on a tight schedule. FSP courses must be based on a needs analysis, which differs each time depending on the set of circumstances. Furthermore, one may have a group of students from a variety of disciplines, such as electrical engineering and mechanical engineering, which requires special planning in terms of the syllabus, in-class activities and homework assignments. Finally, it should be stressed that to be successful, an FSP course designer must cooperate closely with the specialist departments concerned, and ideally, with the educational institutions or companies located abroad that receive the students once they have completed the program. It is therefore essential that an FSP program director be resourceful, flexible, and most of all, devoted to the cause.

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